

Chapter 12

Were the Barbarians a Negative or Positive Factor in Ancient and Medieval History?

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Gregory Guzman is a modern world historian. In this essay he asks some questions about the peoples who have been called “barbarians.”

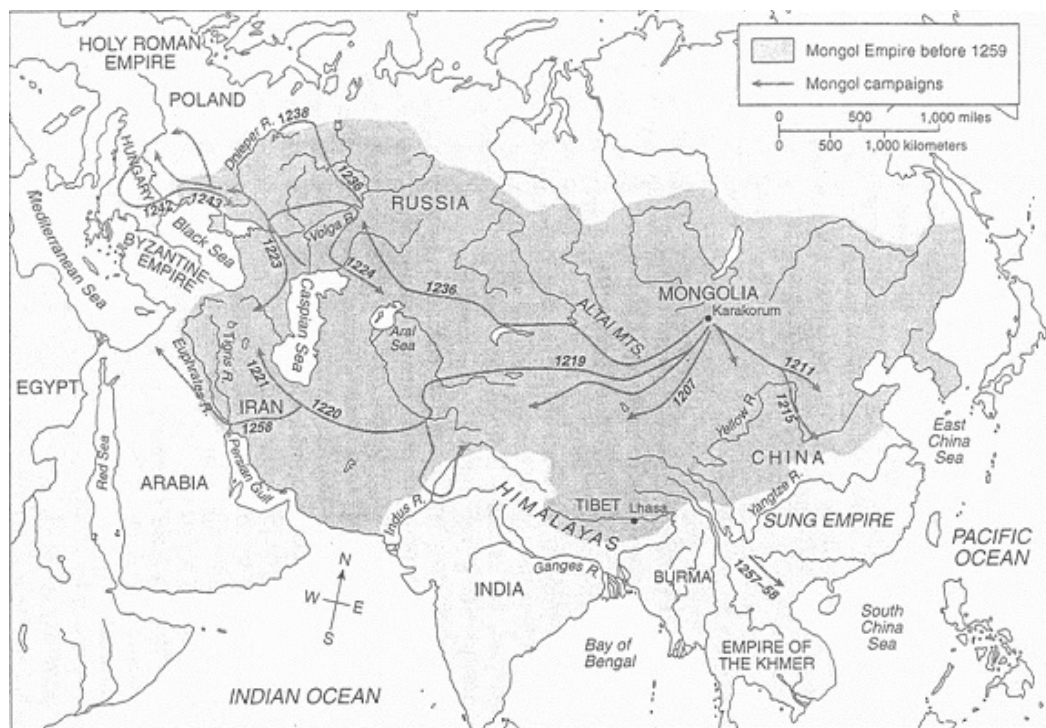
- How were the lives of pastoral nomads different from those of settled people?
- How did the horse shape life on the steppe?
- How effective were these herders as rulers of settled societies?
- What were the achievements of the pastoral nomads?

Thinking Historically

- Why, according to Guzman, have most histories of the barbarians made them look bad?
- How have city people or historians let their own prejudices block an appreciation of the achievements of pastoralists?

According to the general surveys of ancient and medieval history found in most textbooks, barbarian peoples and/or primitive savages repeatedly invaded the early Eurasian civilized centers in Europe, the Middle East, India, and China. All accounts of the early history of these civilizations contain recurrent references to attacks by such familiar and famous barbarians as the Hittites, Hyksos, Casitas, Aryans, Scythians, Sarmatians, Hsiung-nu, Huns, Germans, Turks, and Mongols, and they also record the absorption and assimilation of these Inner Asian barbarian hordes into the respective cultures and lifestyles of the more advanced coastal civilizations. The early sources generally equate the barbarians with chaos and destruction. The barbarians are presented as evil and despicable intruders, associated only with burning, pillaging, and slaughtering, while the civilized peoples are portrayed as the good and righteous forces of stability, order, and progress.

But it must be remembered that most of these early sources are not objective; they are blatantly one-sided, biased accounts written by members of the civilized societies. Thus, throughout recorded history, barbarians have consistently received bad press, bad PR to use the modern terminology. By definition, barbarians were illiterate, and thus they could not write their own version of events. All written records covering barbarian-civilized interaction came from the civilized peoples at war with the barbarians – often the sedentary peoples recently defeated and overwhelmed by those same barbarians. Irritated and angered coastal historians tended to record and emphasize only the negative aspects of their recent interaction with the barbarians. These authors tended to condemn and denigrate the way their barbarian opponents looked and to associate them with the devil and evil, rather than to report with objectivity what actually happened. For example, the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, whose description is distorted by hatred and fear, described the barbarians as “two-footed beasts, seemingly chained to their horses from which they take their meat and drink, never touching a plough and having no houses.” While living in Jerusalem, St. Jerome also left a vivid description of the Huns who “... filled the whole earth with slaughter and panic alike as they flittered hither and thither on their swift horses.... They were at hand everywhere before they were expected; by their speed they outstripped rumor, and they took pity neither upon religion nor rank nor age nor wailing childhood. Those who had just begun to live were compelled to die...”



Such reports obviously made the barbarians look bad, while their nomadic habits and practices, which differed from those of the sedentary coastal peoples, were clearly portrayed as inferior and less advanced: the incarnation of evil itself. These horror-filled and biased descriptions were not the accounts of weak and defenseless peoples. Rather, they were written by the citizens of the most advanced and powerful states and empires in Europe, the Middle East, India, and China. The individual barbarian tribes were, nevertheless, able to attack and invade these strong and well-organized civilized states with relative impunity – pillaging and killing almost at will.

Several important questions, not addressed by the ancient and medieval historians, need to be answered here. Who were these barbarians? Why and how did they manage to repeatedly defeat and overwhelm so easily the wealthiest and most advanced civilizations of the day? And why were they so vehemently condemned and hated in recorded history, if these barbarian Davids were able to consistently defeat such mighty Goliath civilized centers? Since the rich and populous civilized states enjoyed tremendous advantages in the confrontations, why have the barbarians so often been denied the popular role of the underdog?

In the process of answering those questions, this study would like to suggest that maybe the barbarians were not really the “bad guys.” While they may not deserve to be called the “good guys,” they made a much more positive contribution to human civilization than presented in the grossly distorted written sources. The barbarians deserve much more credit than they have been given, for they created a complex pastoral lifestyle as an alternative to sedentary agriculture, and in that achievement they were not subhuman savages only out to loot, pillage, and destroy. As this study will show, the barbarians played a much more positive and constructive role in the development and diffusion of early human history than that with which they are usually credited.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to identify these much-maligned barbarians and describe how their way of life and their basic practices differed from those of the sedentary coastal peoples in order to better evaluate the barbarian role and its impact on the history of humanity.

1
2 In terms of identity, the barbarians were the steppe nomads of Inner Asia or central Eurasia. This
3 area represents one of the toughest and most inhospitable places in the world in which to survive. The
4 climate of the interior of the large Eurasian landmass is not moderated by the distant seas, resulting in
5 extremes of climate, of hot and cold, wet and dry. It is an area of ice, forest, desert, and mountains – with
6 bitter winds, dust, and poor soil. Unlike the coastal regions with their dependable moisture and warmth,
7 the soil of Inner Asia was too cold, poor, and dry for agriculture; thus the sedentary urban lifestyle of the
8 coastal civilized centers was not an option in the Eurasian heartland. The people living there had to be
9 tough to endure such a hostile environment, where they constantly fought both nature and other people for
10 survival.

11
12 Due to necessity, the people of Inner Asia were nomads, wandering in search of food and pasture,
13 and they became herdsmen, shepherds, and warriors. These steppe nomads, the barbarians of recorded
14 history, were frequently nothing more than migrants looking for new homes; these people needed little
15 encouragement to seek safety, security, and better living conditions in the warm, rich, and fertile coastal
16 civilization centers. Thus the steppe barbarians were not always savage marauders coming only to loot
17 and pillage. Many of the so-called Barbarian invaders constituted a surplus population which harsh Inner
18 Asia could not support, or they represented whole tribes being pushed out of their ancestral homeland by
19 stronger tribes behind them. At any rate, these repeated waves of nomadic peoples leaving the steppes
20 soon encountered the coastal civilizations.

21
22 These Inner Asian barbarians were more or less harmless outsiders until the horse dramatically
23 changed their lifestyle on the vast steppes. They adopted the pastoral system as the best way of providing
24 for basic needs. The natural pasture provided by the steppe grassland proved ideal for grazing large herds
25 and flocks of animals. Soon their whole life revolved around their animals; they became shepherds,
26 herders, and keepers of beasts...

27
28 The dominant feature of this emerging barbarian pastoralism was its mounted nature; it was
29 essentially a horse culture by 1000 B.C. At first small horses were kept only for food and milk, but bigger
30 horses eventually led to riding. Once an accomplished fact, mounted practices dramatically changed the
31 lifestyle of the barbarian steppe peoples. Horseback riding made the tending of scattered herds faster and
32 less tiring, and it enlarged the size of herds while increasing the range of pastoral movement. It also made
33 possible, when necessary, the total migration of entire tribes and clans. Mastery of the horse reduced the
34 vast expanses of steppe pasturage to more manageable proportions. Steppe nomads moved twice a year
35 between traditional winter and summer pastures; the spring and fall were spent moving between the
36 necessary grazing grounds. All peoples and possessions moved with regularity; the nomads became used
37 to living in the saddle, so to speak.

38
39 The horse thus became the center of pastoral life on the steppes. The barbarian nomads could
40 literally live off their animals which provided meat, milk, and hides for clothing, coverings, boots, etc.
41 Tools and weapons were made from the bones and sinews, and dried dung was used as fuel. The
42 barbarians ate, sold, negotiated, slept, and took care of body functions in the saddle as indicated in the
43 following quotations: "From their horses, by day and night every one of that nation buys and sells, eats
44 and drinks, and, bowed over the narrow neck of the animal, relaxes in a sleep so deep as to be
45 accompanied by many dreams." "All the time they let themselves be carried by their horses. In that way
46 they fight wars, participate in banquets, attend public and private business. On their back, they move,
47 stand still, carry on trade, and converse." These mounted practices led to the emergence of the centaur
48 motif in Middle Eastern art, as the civilized people tended to view the horse and rider as one inseparable
49 unit.
50

1 Military action also became an integral part of nomadic steppe life. Warfare was simply cavalry
2 action by the pastoral herdsmen who served as soldiers for the duration of the conflict. Steppe military
3 service differed little from the normal, on-the-move pastoral life. Large-scale steppe alliances were hard
4 to organize and even harder to hold together among the independent nomads. Such temporary alliances,
5 called hordes, rose swiftly to great strength and power, but they usually declined and disintegrated just as
6 quickly.

7
8 At any rate, these barbarian nomads were tough and hardy warriors. The horse gave them speed
9 and mobility over both the light and heavily armed infantry of the civilized centers, but for this speed and
10 mobility the barbarians gave up any type of defensive armor. They learned to guide their horses with their
11 knees, since both arms needed to be free for the bow and arrow, their primary offensive weapon. By 1000
12 B.C. the compound bow was in common use by barbarians. This shorter bow could be handled with ease
13 from horseback, and arrows could be shot up to three hundred yards with accuracy. As steppe hunters, all
14 barbarians made excellent archers.

15
16 Early civilized armies had no cavalry. The famous Macedonian phalanx and the formidable
17 Roman legions contained only light and heavily armed infantry. At first these brave foot soldiers had no
18 tactical maneuvers to face and contain a barbarian cavalry charge. Even more devastating was the storm
19 of arrows raining down upon them long before they could engage in the traditional hand-to-hand combat.
20 The formidable steppe cavalry thus subjected civilized defenses to continuous pressure. Every nomad
21 with a horse and bow was a potential front-line soldier who was tough, resourceful, and ferocious,
22 whereas only a small percentage of the civilized population was equipped and trained for war. The
23 nomadic lifestyle and the speed of the horse eliminated the need for expensive and heavy metal armor and
24 its accompanying technological skills. Cavalry tactics gave an initial military advantage to the barbarians
25 and the mounted horsemen won most of the early battles. The best defense against barbarian cavalry was
26 an insurmountable obstacle, a wall. Ten- to twenty-foot-high walls of dirt, wood, or stone were built
27 around cities and along some frontiers, i.e., the Great Wall of China. The old statement that Rome fell
28 because China built a wall may not be such a simple overstatement after all.

29
30 Since they had the military advantage of cavalry tactics, the steppe nomads attacked and
31 conquered various coastal civilizations with regularity. In a typical conquest, the victorious barbarians
32 were the new military/political rulers. These new rulers possessed strengths obvious to all. The barbarians
33 had vigorous and dynamic leadership; good, able, and charismatic leadership had been needed to organize
34 the independent nomads into an effective horde in the first place. The new rulers had the complete loyalty
35 of their followers; their group identity based on common blood and ancestors resulted in an intense
36 personal and individual allegiance and commitment.

37
38 The first century after the initial conquest was usually an era of dynamic leadership, good
39 government, and economic prosperity, as nomadic strengths mixed with the local advances and practices
40 of that civilization. The new ruling family was often a fusion of the best of both sides as the barbarian
41 victors married into the previous ruling dynasty. This brought forth an age of powerful and successful
42 rulers, and produced an era of energetic leadership, good government, low taxes, agricultural revival, and
43 peace...

44
45 After this early period of revitalized and dynamic rule, slow decline usually set in. Royal vigor
46 and ability sank as the rulers became soft, both mentally and physically. Without physical exercise and
47 self-discipline, the rulers became overindulgent, instantly acquiring everything they wanted—excessive
48 amounts of food or drink, harems, puppets, and yes-men as advisers. At the same time court rivalries and
49 internal divisiveness began to emerge once the strong unity required for the conquest was no longer
50 needed. A rivalry that often arose was between the ruler and various groups of his followers: his military,
51 his bureaucracy, his harem (especially the queen mothers), his conquered subjects, and his old nomadic

1 supporters. His steppe horsemen began to give first loyalty to their new family land rather than to their
2 individual leader who was now weak, impaired and soft. Such internal rivalries weakened the central
3 government and led to chaos and civil wars. Thus, a civilize center was ripe for the next series of
4 invasions and conquest by the next group of unified, tough, and well-led barbarians who would, in turn,
5 be assimilated and absorbed in this process of on-going revitalization of stagnant civilizations.
6

7 Despite the usual negative view and definition of barbarians provided by the sedentary civilized
8 peoples, the steppe nomads had developed a complex pastoral and nomadic society. They were tough and
9 hardy horsemen whose cavalry tactics gave them the military advantage for several centuries. The
10 barbarians used this advantage, and their periodic attacks on civilization centers caused destruction,
11 sometimes severe destruction. But the barbarian role in mankind's history was not always negative. The
12 barbarians can and should be viewed as representing a dynamic and vital element in human history for
13 they periodically revived many stagnating coastal civilizations. Many of these sedentary centers
14 flourished, growing rich and powerful. In the process they also became conservative, settled into a fixed
15 routine. Preferring the status quo, they tended to use old answers and ways to face new problems and
16 issues, and as a consequence they lost the vitality and flexibility required for healthy and progressive
17 growth.
18

19 The barbarians were active and dynamic. In their conquests of civilized centers, they frequently
20 destroyed and eliminated the old and outdated and preserved and passed on only the good and useful
21 elements. Sometimes, the mounted invaders also introduced new ideas and practices. Some of these new
22 barbarian innovations (horseback riding, archery, trousers, and boots, etc.) fused with the good and useful
23 practices of the sedentary peoples. Old and new practices and processes merged, and provided viable
24 alternatives to the old, outdated civilized ways which had failed or outlived their usefulness. This fusion
25 brought forth dynamic creativity and development. The ongoing encounters with barbarian strangers
26 inevitably fostered innovation and progress in the civilized centers – due to their need to adjust in order to
27 survive...
28

29 It can be argued that barbarians also played a positive role in the spread and diffusion of
30 civilization itself. The four major Eurasian civilization centers were separated from each other by deserts,
31 mountains, and the vast expanses of the steppe heartland of Inner Asia. In its early stages, each
32 civilization was somewhat isolated from the others. Overland trade and contact was possible only through
33 the barbarian steppe highway which stretched over five thousand miles across Eurasia, from Hungary to
34 Manchuria. There was little early sea contact between the four sedentary centers, as naval travel was
35 longer and more dangerous than the overland routes.
36

37 Thus the steppe barbarians were the chief agency through which the ideas and practices of one
38 civilization were spread to another before 1500 A.D. According to [historian] William H. McNeil, there
39 was much conceptual diffusion carried along the steppe highway by the barbarians. Writing originated in
40 the ancient Middle East. The concept, not the form, of writing then spread eastward from the Middle East,
41 as the Indian and Chinese forms and characters were significantly different than Middle Eastern
42 cuneiform. The making and use of bronze and chariots also spread from the Middle East to Europe, India,
43 and China. Chariots were introduced to China, on the eastern end of the steppe highway, a few centuries
44 after their appearance in the Middle East. Needless to say, this type of early cultural diffusion is difficult
45 to document with any degree of certainty, but enough evidence exists to make it highly probable, even if
46 not scientifically provable.
47

48 The late medieval period provides even more examples of cultural diffusion via the movement of
49 barbarians along the Inner Asian steppe highway. The great Eurasian *Pax Mongolica* opened the way for
50 much cultural cross-fertilization in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries. Chinese inventions
51 like gunpowder and printing made their way to the Middle East and Europe in this period. Records show

1 that Chinese artillerymen accompanied the Mongol armies into the Middle East. Papal envoys like John
2 of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck traveled to the Mongol capital of Karakorum in the 1240s and
3 1250s. In the 1280s, Marco Polo brought with him from Kublai Khan's court in China a Mongol princess
4 to be the bride of the Mongol Khan of Persia...

5
6 The cultural interaction and exchange between Eurasian coastal civilizations ended with the
7 collapse of the Mongol Khanates in Persia and China in the mid-fourteenth century. The barbarian
8 Mongols, therefore, provided the last period of great cultural cross-fertilization before the modern age.
9

10 Historical evidence that exists enables one to argue that the barbarian nomads played an active
11 and positive role in the history of mankind. The barbarian invaders revitalized stagnant and decaying
12 civilizations and were responsible for a certain amount of cultural diffusion between emerging ancient
13 and medieval civilizations. The traditional portrayal of barbarians as mere marauders and destroyers is
14 misleading and incorrect. Unfortunately this is the usual role they are given when historians center their
15 study of the past narrowly on the civilized centers and the biased written sources produced by those
16 peoples. All too often historians tend to adopt and reflect the biases and values of their subjects under
17 study, and thus continue to denigrate and condemn all barbarians without objectively evaluating their real
18 contributions to human development. The study of the steppe nomads, the barbarians, is just as valid a
19 topic for historical analysis as the traditional study of coastal sedentary civilizations. Only by knowing
20 and understanding the pastoral barbarian can historians accurately evaluate the constant interaction
21 between the two lifestyles and come to understand the full picture of humanity's early growth and
22 development in the ancient and medieval periods of Eurasian history.